

NO MIGRANT HEADACHES!

In Kern County, California, Where Every Child is Accepted and Respected.

Jesse D. Stockton

Almost every one of our teachers in Kern County (the scene of a portion of GRAPES OF WRATH - and I still think Steinbeck exaggerated) is striving mightily to bring the best from ALL his pupils. It makes no difference what the color of their skin - no matter whether they are landowners' children or the children of migratory workers. And I am happy to say that the people of Kern County and California are giving these teachers excellent backing, not only in funds but in moral support.

I have been able to keep track of some of the many children of migrant workers who have gone through our schools, and a number of them have earned a name for themselves.

I think of Fred and Eddie Mason, for example, two of the boys whom I taught at Kern County Union High School, Bakersfield. Both Fred and Eddie made excellent grades in school. Today Eddie is occupying a responsible place in industry in Bakersfield. Fred is a school teacher in our county.

Then there is George Valos. He was the first Greek boy ever born in Bakersfield and was just drifting through school. He didn't think he could amount to much. But during his freshman year at Kern County Union High School, Bakersfield, George was made a part of the first-string Sandabs- the B-class football team.

This relatively simple event had a far-reaching effect on him. He began to think that school was worthwhile, and though the educational base he had previously built was definitely wobbly, his new-found ambition and efforts to stay with the group resulted in his graduation from Kern County Union High School and later on from Santa Barbara, a branch of the University of California. Today George is coordinator of welfare and guidance in Kern County and doing additional graduate work.

We have hundreds of these children, now grown up, who are good, solid citizens.

Kern County has no unique system for the solution of the problems of educating the child of the migrant worker, and yet we have made great progress, not only in educating these children but in getting them and their parents accepted as part of the social structure of our county.

This acceptance, which is important to migrant children and to their families, cannot be achieved by setting up a separate school system for such children. All our Kern County administrators agreed that children of migrant workers must be incorporated into our schools as welcome and worthy members.

The introduction of cotton-picking machinery has stabilized our population a great deal. The purchase of low-cost homes by the erstwhile migrants has been another stabilizing factor. There is now a tendency for the parents to live at a central place where the children may attend school regularly while the parents go out to nearby areas to work the crops.

The Mexican young people in this area were formerly thought incapable of achieving a satisfactory education on the higher levels. However, as they have been accepted and as their parents have recognized the desirability of education, many of them have been showing great progress and are now accepted without question as teachers in our schools when they are fully qualified. The Chinese and Japanese are beginning to be accepted also.

Our attendance problem is practically whipped. A few short years ago when we went to the various labor camps and fields in Kern County we found literally hundreds of children illegally working in the fields. Farmers, labor contractors, and workers treated us as enemies who represented the "law."

Recently George Valos and I conducted a spot check of the working conditions

in Kern County where a half-million bales of cotton were in the process of being harvested. We visited 27 school districts, checked up on over 2500 cotton pickers.

What did we find? The farmers, labor contractors and workers were cooperating with us so completely that there was not a single child of school age working in any of these fields during school hours except three who had work permits from the high schools which they normally attended. Such results can be obtained only when everyone from the United States Labor Commissioner to the schools and the juvenile authorities workers cooperatively for the benefit of all the children of the community.

We often fall short of achieving all that we might in human relationships, but there are many encouraging signs that our students are using as their yardstick basic values, untouched by prejudice.

The pupils of Buttonwillow Elementary School District elected a Negro student body president although over half the student body was of Southern origin and less than 5% of the total enrolment were Negroes. The Vineland Elementary School District has had Negro boys elected as the outstanding students by a student body that was almost completely white and over half of Southern origin.

Younger children seem to have little racial prejudice, but sometimes it does slip in. In Buttonwillow the school touch-football team played the Lions' Club and was defeated. Then a team of Mexican children from the same school played the Lions' Club and although defeated, did better than the school team. After this a division of the student body on the basis of Mexicans versus non-Mexicans began to appear.

Sizing up the situation the superintendent arranged for a group made up of the best members of the school team and the Mexican team to play the Lions' Club. The combined forces defeated the doughty Lions. After this victory the children could see the value of unity.

Incidentally all mothers, regardless of race, meet together naturally and effectively in the parent-teacher association in this and other school districts of the county.

We are convinced that our judgment has been sound in taking migrant children into our regular schools and making them feel welcome. In places where special schools are created for them, there is a tendency to deny them the best in teachers, equipment, and play facilities. They and their parents quite properly resent this.

I am happy to be able to say that in most of the schools in Kern County I find clean children with happy faces and a friendly spirit. The secret is good teachers, good citizens and a community that backs its schools!